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Chapter 1

The Value of Social Ecology in the Struggles to Come

Federico Venturini

*Memory and imagination are the only forces that can bring about real change.
Remember and imagine!* (Chodorkoff 2011, 338)

MURRAY BOOKCHIN'S SOCIAL ECOLOGY

Faced with deep social and ecological crises, Murray Bookchin, the founder of social ecology, expressed his concerns for the future of humanity: “If we do not do the impossible, we shall be faced with the unthinkable” (Bookchin 2005, 107). As a political ecology, social ecology argues that today’s social and ecological crises are inextricably rooted in the domination of human by human which, in turn, gives rise to the notion of domination over nature. These two crises are exacerbated by the present hegemonic social, economic, and political system: capitalism.

Various theories using the term “social ecology,” or similar, have been developed since the 1950s, spanning multiple fields and disciplines within the social sciences, and attempts have been made to merge such diverse strands of social ecology thought with Bookchin’s social ecology (Crowe and Foley 2013; Krøvel 2014). In this piece, however, I focus on Bookchin’s milieu that today stands as a coherent political philosophy on its own terms (Biehl 1999; Curran 2006; Marshall 2008; White 2008; Morris 2012). Prominent among those within Bookchin’s tradition are Daniel Chodorkoff, Brian Tokar, Ynestra King, Chaia Heller, John Clark, Janel Biehl (although she has broken with social ecology: Biehl 2011), Dimitri Roussopoulos, Matt Hern, and Eleanor Finley.

Social ecology is more than mere diagnostic for today's crises. Permeated by dialectical naturalism, social ecology presents two important projects. On the one hand, it challenges the current capitalist system and all forms of oppression including racism, ethno-centrism, and patriarchy. On the other hand, social ecology offers a reconstructive and revolutionary vision for an ecological post-scarcity society. Social ecology considers current societal struggles, which surface in both urban and rural contexts, while also addressing central questions of nature, science, and technology which arise in these contexts. What is more, social ecology proposes ways in which to construct a new society, promoting prefigurative political organizing strategies, such as affinity groups, the formation of directly democratic social movements, as well as educational and political projects that include communalism. Moreover, social ecology provides an ethics of complementarity which lays at the foundation of struggles to promote sex/gender liberation, horizontalism, egalitarianism, mutual aid, self-determination, and decentralization. This is the power of social ecology: it offers a coherent and holistic theory that, while critiquing current social and ecological crises, provides a reconstructive vision and a theory of action aimed at achieving a free and ecological society (Bookchin 1986a). Social ecology is, thus, a grounding theory to foster social change and the development of social movements.

Bookchin has been acclaimed as an anarchist thinker since the 1970s. However, since 1987, he has been involved with two major ideological clashes: first with deep ecology (Bookchin 1987) and then with anarchism (Biehl 2007). These debates have been tarnished by *ad hominem* attacks on Bookchin, creating a caricature of his thought (Price 2012). White (2008) argues that in the last period of his life, Bookchin retreated in his positions, narrowing the debate on social ecology and making it a more rigid theory. In 1999, he broke with anarchism (Biehl 2007). However, since Bookchin's death, his concept of social ecology remains of inestimable value, leading to its revival, most visible in its vital influence on the Kurdish resistance in Syria and Turkey (Hammy and Finley 2015; Stanchev 2015; Hunt 2017) and upon the municipalist movement around the world (Mansilla 2017; Rubio-Pueyo 2017).

Social ecology has deeply influenced both the Kurdish and the municipalist movements, yet often this core influence is merely mentioned or unacknowledged. Indeed, given the renewed interest, and the frequent caricature of Bookchin's social ecology (Price 2012), it is essential to give an all-round vision, highlighting its key features and prospects. Social ecology is considered as a form of anarchist political ecology (Clark 2005 and 2012; Roussopoulos 2015), although some features distinguish it from other parts of this tradition (see White 2008). Social ecology's stress upon the connection

between human and ecological crises (Robbins 2012), particularly links it to the political ecology tradition. More specifically, social ecology is a “political ecology with a libertarian and communitarian social perspective” (Clark 2005: 1569), an approach that marks it as the precursor of an anarchist political ecology.

The object of this chapter is twofold and is structured as follows. First, it highlights key ways that social ecology can contribute toward analyses and practices of social movements all over the world, such as the Kurdish freedom movement, in the struggles to come. To do this, it introduces key concepts of social ecology: its core concepts, dialectical naturalism, social ecology praxis, communalism and, finally, its idea of eco-communities. The second part of the chapter shows how to reconcile social ecology with the anarchist tradition. To this end, I focus on the relationship between anarchism and social ecology, before critically assessing communalism. Finally, I offer some conclusions, highlighting the necessity to build a culture of resistance.

BETWEEN FREEDOM AND DOMINATION: THE MOTOR OF SOCIAL ECOLOGY

Social ecology is based on challenging social hierarchy and social domination, with a theoretical elaboration that attempts to go beyond Marxist ideas about social class and the state. This elaboration is based on the idea that “the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human” (Bookchin 2005, 65). Crucially, “nearly all our present ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems” (Bookchin 1993, np): environment and society are inextricably linked to each other. The pressing planetary environmental problems (Rockström et al. 2009) that demand solutions can be addressed only by facing social problems. As stated in Price’s recent reassessment of Bookchin’s work (2012), social ecology is fundamentally grounded upon an understanding that hierarchy and domination as such “were in place *before* the emergence of the surplus. They are thus in the Bookchin programme *not* the inevitable by-product of the move to an economic world; they are not, perhaps most importantly, the by-product of a human project to dominate a stingy, harsh natural world” (157), but are born further back in human history with the emergence of gerontocracy. This understanding is the central “motor” of social ecology (Price 2012) that is derived from a re-examination of human civilization (Bookchin 2005).

This idea deviates from the classical Marxist tradition and uses concepts that help us move beyond an analysis based solely on economic relationships toward a deeper understanding of domination. For this reason, Bookchin

(1986a) stresses the importance of concentrating on domination and hierarchy and away from a focus on class and exploitation.

The organic world is defined as “an evolutionary process” (Bookchin 1995a, 17) in which two different kinds of nature, to which human beings belong, coexist: “first nature” and “second nature,” where the former is constituted by mere biological evolution and the latter to human social evolution (Bookchin 1995a, 2005). Second nature developed from first nature, not in opposition to it, where humans are “nature rendered self-conscious” (White 2008: 109). Many Western thinkers offered a dichotomy between nonhuman nature and human society (Pepper 2003), while for social ecology humankind plays a multifaceted role within nature, being a unique expression of it, still part of it, but often acting in an antagonistic way toward it.

In this way, social ecology critiques both the tendencies of anthropocentrism (where humanity is considered superior to nature) and deep ecology (where humans have to return to nature), understanding the uniqueness of human progress in parallel with natural evolution and proposing an organic point of view in analyzing the problem (Bookchin 1996; Staudenmaier 2005).

Social ecology focuses on a rational analysis of “second nature” and the origins of social hierarchy and domination within it. This analysis starts with early human communities; what Bookchin calls “organic societies,” “spontaneously formed, non-coercive and egalitarian” (White 2008, 36). Other important features of organic societies were the absence of the idea of human destiny to rule nature, the common usufruct of land, the presence of an irreducible minimum for everyone (e.g., in terms of food and shelter), the equality of the unequal, commitment to freedom, and cooperation. In these societies, humanity is thus viewed as part of nature, the concept of domination is not yet developed, and women and men lived in balance. In Bookchin’s interpretation, the first form of domination emerged from organic societies: that of the elders over the young. Following this analysis, “the notion that all ecological problems are social problems, [. . .] stem[s] in the first instance from the emergence of hierarchy in its nascent form in the gerontocracy” (Price 2012, 157). On this point, Bookchin is clear, and he also stresses that the concept of domination of nature is a human construct that does not exist in first nature: “what we talk about when we speak of ‘the domination of nature’ is an ideology, not a fact. ‘Nature’ can no more be ‘dominated’ than an electron or an atom” (Bookchin 1995d, np). Moreover, according to this interpretation, social evolution is an effect of “changes in social forms and relationships and not because of the natural reaction to a harsh and necessitarian natural world; [thus] hierarchy as such is perhaps not the inevitable by-product of humanity’s historical move through civilisation” (Price 2012, 157).

While Bookchin's anthropological accounts have been problematized by some authors (White 2008), it is important to consider, however, the value of social theories based on ethnographic or anthropological work aimed at outlining and describing alternative possibilities (Graeber 2004). In this regard, Price (2012), while acknowledging the necessity of clarifications, underlines the "coherence and unity" (195) of his social history.

Overcoming domination in social forms and relations is thus fundamental for building a new society based on freedom. This call emphasizes that changing our social structures can also dialectically change our relationship with nature. With this dialectical process, Bookchin goes beyond the classical Marxist concept that emphasizes the contrast between nature and human, or indeed between the rural and the urban. In his analysis, this contrast has shaped the development of our society through history, exacerbating exploitation. Morris (2012) adds that "Marx [. . .] was preoccupied with the preconditions of freedom (technological development, material abundance) not with the conditions of freedom (decentralization, the formation of communities, direct democracy, and technologies and urban life on a human scale)" (245) and social ecology aims to fulfill this gap, analyzing the conditions of freedom. To make a substantial change, for a real ecological society, a process of profound reconciliation between nature and human is necessary, pointing at the birth of a new nonhierarchical society based on concepts of freedom and cooperation, going beyond first and second nature (Bookchin 1996). The actualization of human potentialities can only be achieved after the relation between first and second nature has been established on a non-exploitative basis.

Bookchin's (1995b, 2005) analysis of history focuses on domination and freedom and highlights different times in which domination developed or aspects of freedom flourished. With these historical accounts, he not only underlines the various legacies of domination and freedom but also underscores its immanent emancipatory potentiality.

DIALECTICAL NATURALISM, RECONSTRUCTIVE ETHICS, AND LIBERATORY POWER

Dialectical naturalism is the grounding philosophy of social ecology. Skeptical of the epistemological turn of postmodernism, eco-mysticism, and primitivism, social ecology emphasizes the importance of human reason and proposes ways of thinking that "encompass processes, developments, and the unfolding of phenomena in which potentialities, like seeds, initiate the becoming of a given thing or condition" (Bookchin 1995a, 233). In particular,

building on Hegelian dialectical idealism and Marx's dialectical materialism, Bookchin proposes dialectical naturalism as an ecological thinking, as a way of exploring reality and potentiality, that is, what it is and what should be, building a "dialectical or organic way of thinking" (Morris 2012, 242). Potentiality involves, in a call for action, "a sensitivity to the latent possibilities that inhere in a given constellation of phenomena, not a surrender to predetermined inevitability" (Bookchin 1986a: 13).

In a domain in which false realism rules, ethics are ignored. In opposition to this, dialectical naturalism aims toward ethics that are "neither absolutist nor relativist, authoritarian nor chaotic, necessitarian nor arbitrary" (Bookchin 1986a, 11). To offer this much-needed guidance, dialectical naturalism explores the first nature and human evolution that brought us to the development of second nature. It starts from the idea that first nature is not just governed by a vulgar interpretation of Darwinian natural selection. Bookchin, following the mutualistic naturalism of Kropotkin (Macauley 1998), understands natural selection to operate on the principles of diversity and cooperation (Bookchin 1996, 2005). As summarized by Heller, first nature is "a dialectical process of unfolding that is marked by tendencies toward ever greater levels of differentiation, consciousness, and freedom" (1999, 136).

For social ecology, despite first nature not being a locus wherein finding inspiring examples for human behaviors is possible, "it is the 'matrix' for an ethics, and ecology can be a 'source of values and ideals'" (Marshall 2008, 610-611). From first nature can be dialectically extrapolated principles for a nature-informed ethics (Bookchin 1996), an understanding of ways in which human action can self-consciously develop human potentialities.

Under this definition of ethics, "whether a society is 'good' or 'bad,' moral or immoral, for example, can be objectively determined by whether it has fulfilled its potentialities for rationality and morality" (Bookchin 1996, 24). Bookchin (1986a) stresses how key principles in dialectical naturalism are participation—crucial in the natural world in building eco-communities—and differentiation—linked to ecological stability and freedom. Without participation, the individual is disempowered and atomized; with no differentiation, the individual becomes a homogenized thing. To conclude, dialectical naturalism, by justifying an opposition to the unchallenged ethical roots of domination, posits the basis for a realizable ecological utopia aiming to fulfill the full potentialities of first and second nature (Bookchin 1986a).

Social ecology thus provides a new ground for the anarchist project, justified not from an anthropological perspective, as Graeber (2004) suggested,

but from a biological-ethical point of view. This approach can support the idea that, even if a legacy of hierarchy and domination has developed throughout human history, domination is not an innate aspect of the human project. There is a powerful legacy of freedom too, as expressed by continuous eruptions of freedom.

For social ecology, freedom is defined as “the autonomous individual’s freedom to shape material life in a form that is neither ascetic nor hedonistic, but a blend of the best in both—one that is ecological, rational, and artistic” (Bookchin 2005, 300). To understand how freedom can be affirmed over domination, the issue of “power” should be addressed. In opposition to the Foucauldian argument, prevalent within anarchist theory, that power can be destroyed, Bookchin asserts “Power cannot be abolished; it is always a feature of social and political life. Power that is not in the hands of the masses must inevitably fall into the hands of their oppressors” (2015, 143). Power can, however, assume different forms, such as the “power to destroy and power to create” (Bookchin 1988), where the former is an expression of human domination and the latter is an expression of freedom. Power to create is the power to build an alternative—a free and democratic utopia—in the sense that Bookchin called “a liberatory use of power” (1995a, 183) and Clark later termed “power of self-determination” (2012, 513). What needs to be eliminated is “hierarchy, domination, and classes, [as well as] the use of power to force people to act against their will” (Bookchin 1995a, 183). Bookchin thus makes a clear distinction “between power held by state institutions and power claimed by popular institutions or between institutions that lead to tyranny and those that lead to freedom” (Bookchin 1995a, 184). This is a position that echoes the dichotomy between power from above versus power from below—or power of resistance (see Sharp et al. 2000). In this analysis, we can aspire to distribute power, to eliminate its abuses. However, this claim is disputed. For instance, Holloway (2010), coming from a nonorthodox Marxist point of view, states that all past emancipatory examples of taking power have failed. Also referring to the Zapatista experience, he hopes for a society built by people “who do not exploit and do not want to exploit, [. . .] who do not have power and do not want to have power” (203). Answering this, from a social ecological perspective, Bookchin stresses that the “power that does not belong to the people invariably belongs to the state and the exploitative interests it represents” (2007, 50). Similarly, Legard argues that power has a neutral connotation and “is always a mix in between ‘power-to’ and ‘power-over’” (2010, 70). From the perspective of social ecology, “power-to” needs to be distributed and made accessible, while “power-over” must be avoided.

THE PRAXIS OF SOCIAL ECOLOGY: DIRECT ACTION

Linked to anarchist praxis, at the core of the social ecology tradition lays direct action (Bookchin 2004), both as tactic and strategy. Direct actions are diverse, and they can span from grassroots work to more confrontational and militant actions. In its tactical form, direct action is “a method of abolishing the state without recourse to state institutions and techniques” (Bookchin 2004, xi). As strategy, Bookchin describes direct action as: “A mode of praxis intended to promote the individuation of the ‘masses’” (2004, xi). Doing so, he stresses the importance of direct action in empowering people (Bookchin 1988, 2004). Through a process whereby the identity of the particular is asserted within the framework of the general, the praxis of direct action frees people from a homogeneous mass and puts their future in their hands “mak[ing] people aware of themselves as individuals who can affect their own destiny” (Bookchin 2004: xi).

Direct action is thus a moment of empowerment, in which people are enabled to take back control of the future of the city, “learning how to manage every aspect of our lives from producing to organizing, from educating to printing” (Bookchin 1988, 53). Thus, direct actions are not just a tactic but embryonic modes for a different way of living today, a way that prefigures a different tomorrow and fights for it. Further than stressing its ability to empower, Bookchin (2005) also makes a strong connection between direct action and the need to reaffirm citizenship in its primary sense: “I must emphasize that direct democracy is ultimately the most advanced form of direct action” (438). The next section will explore the political project of social ecology that will enable direct democracy: communalism.

A POLITICAL PROJECT: COMMUNALISM

In the late 1980s, Bookchin, heavily inspired by the experience of ancient Athens and the town assemblies in New England, proposed a coherent project for a new political system: communalism (see Bookchin 1995b, 2007, 2015; Biehl 1998; Roussopoulos 2015). Communalism is the final, and definitive, chosen title of a project that Bookchin (2007) previously called libertarian municipalism. Communalism has been positively reviewed by Harvey (2012) and is currently implemented by the Kurdish population (Hunt 2017). Communalism is conceived as both a revolutionary strategy in the present and as potential societal organization in a liberated future.

Those who share a perspective from social ecology are aware of the importance of the city for human development. Urbanization and

citification, which are usually accepted as synonyms, are perceived as antagonistic (Bookchin 1995b). Only citification presupposes the idea of society, while the notion of “urban” refers to an amorphous environment that absorbs all available space. Social life and civilization are developed in cities thanks to the proximity of marketplaces to living quarters that fosters everyday social interactions. Citification enhances human life in two different domains, everyday life and the political, which together form the truly social life. However, the concepts of “civitas” and citizenship are lost in the modern metropolis, and the city is becoming the space where the state affirms its power and control.

Today’s urban belts and megalopolis cannot be considered “real cities” (Bookchin 1986b, 1995b). Urbanization is, paradoxically, destroying the very reason for the birth of cities: the potentiality for individuals to build communities that can fully develop society’s possibilities. Moreover, urbanization is contaminating those values and institutions born from civic relationships, replacing them with values of anonymity, homogenization, and institutional gigantism (Bookchin 1995b). This is reflected by the increase of individualism, the dissolution of social or civic commitment to private life, the retreat of the intelligentsia into academia, and in the “consumption, not only production, [that] has become an end in itself” (Bookchin 1995b, 194). The possibility of a critical mass of people living together in cities created politics: the possibility to communally practice direct democracy.

Aware of the impossibility of achieving a completely self-reliant community, the solution is a confederation of self-governed municipalities, a “Commune of communes”:

A network of administrative councils whose members or delegates are elected from popular face-to-face democratic assemblies, in the various villages, towns, and even neighborhoods of large cities. The members of these confederal councils are strictly mandated, recallable, and responsible to the assemblies that choose them for the purpose of coordinating and administering the policies formulated by the assemblies themselves. Their function is thus a purely administrative and practical one, not a policy-making one. (Bookchin 1995b, 253)

Bookchin introduces this new system to allow people to return to the heart of political debate, suggesting an organization that should encourage public participation and direct democracy. In developing this, he refers to Proudhon and Kropotkin’s (Macauley 1998) idea of “communes,” led by principles of self-management, complementarity, and mutual aid, and he defines “decentralization,” “statelessness,” “collective management,” and “direct democracy” as

the principal characteristics of communalism (Bookchin 1986b, 1995b). To maintain these features, the delegates at the confederal level must be under the control of their assemblies.

The aim of communalism is to “advance a perspective for extending local citizen-oriented power at the expense and ultimately the removal of the nation-state by village, town, and city confederation” (Bookchin 1995b, 1). In this way, communalism emerges as a “new” political project, a “fundamental duality of power” (Bookchin 1995b, 10) in which confederated municipalities acquire power at the expense of the nation-state. One of Bookchin’s aims is to propose “a self-conscious practice in which confederal municipalists can engage in local electoral activity” (Bookchin 1995b, 9). From an economic point of view, this approach proposes a new form of economy that goes beyond nationalization or collectivization (Bookchin 1995b; Staudenmaier 2002), toward a moral economy (Bookchin 1986a): communalism proposes the “municipalization of the economy and its management by the community as part of a politics of public self-management” (Bookchin 1986b, 181).

Moreover, concerning the organization of the commune, it is important to remember the difference between policymaking, which is a people’s duty, and administration, which addresses technical and logistical problems and in which assemblies’ participation is not entirely necessary. Thus, the constitution of administrative bodies of municipalities is considered possible. However, Bookchin acknowledges that a complete autarchy would be harmful: “interdependence among communities is no less important than interdependence among individuals” (Bookchin 1995b, 237). Of course, singular decentralization, self-sufficiency, human-scale communities, and technology alone are not sufficient to create democratic social changes: only their combination ensures hope for a better future.

Local elections should also be used to foster dual power; a position that stimulated harsh debates (Biehl 2007). Classical anarchists have, for example, critiqued electoral participation which they reject as a form of statism, upholding principles of consensus decision-making over the majority system. The practice of communalism remains, nevertheless, always in tension with the state and suggests that the movement should avoid running candidates at the regional or national level because history has taught us that “state power is corruptive” (Bookchin 1995b, 11). However, Bookchin suggests participation in elections at the civic level as a strategy for implementing social change, believing in the possibility of intervening at a this level without being compromised by the central or local state. Elections at the municipal level could be seen differently: the municipality is the formal political arena closest to the people, and thus similar to the Greek polis.

ECO-COMMUNITY: TOWARD POST-SCARCITY AND NEW URBAN FUTURES

As explained, communalism is the political organization of the utopian eco-communities envisioned in social ecology and is by definition an ecological politics (Bookchin 1986a). Once their political structure is determined, it is also important to consider their feasibility in terms of resources. In this regard, Bookchin introduces the idea of “post-scarcity” (Bookchin 2004). Following the political ecology tradition, the current economic capitalist system is increasingly promoting worldwide social imbalances and environmental problems, causing a deep scarcity of resources (Swyngedouw 2004; Heynen et al. 2006). However, in Bookchin’s project, the concrete availability of resources and a tremendous advancement in technics can contribute to building a different society, a post-scarcity society, where it is possible to imagine “the fulfilment of social and cultural potentialities” (Bookchin 2004, iv). Aware of the legacy of human domination over fellow humans and nature, social ecology is not calling for a technocratic approach. In its conceptualization, to reduce scarcity, deep social changes are required, rooted in the construction of a new relationship with nature in which humans are conscious of their impacts (Bookchin 1988; Hopkins 2008; Hern 2010). In this context, post-scarcity is not understood as merely a material status: the possibility of having a large enough quantity of goods for all people to survive at a decent level opens the way to a deeper possibility, the achievement of freedom (Bookchin 2004, xvi). The main requirements for building a post-scarcity society are autonomy, self-reliance, sustainability, and communality (Imboden 2011).

Having recognized the detrimental impacts on the environment of the employment of certain types of technology, Bookchin is, however, far from stating that technology is intrinsically “bad” or “good.” Technology is indeed considered fundamental to reach positive and wide-ranging solutions to today’s crises and to achieve a “balance between man [*sic*] and the natural world” (Bookchin 1965, 188). For social ecology, in the building of new communitarian social relations, moral technologies, conceived as the “good” technologies based on social ecology ethics (Bookchin 1996), will permit the existence of eco-communities, built on a renovated human scale (Bookchin 1995b).

ANARCHISM AND SOCIAL ECOLOGY

Both a social ecology perspective and social-movement practices place high importance upon direct democracy, direct action, and prefiguration, which are

also key elements in the anarchist tradition. To support and analyze current social-movement practices, however, social ecology furthers its position in terms of consensus decision-making, militant direct action, and grassroots work. To do so, social ecology re-establishes a relationship with its anarchist roots.

Until the beginning of the 1990s, Bookchin indeed favored grassroots initiatives that emerged from social movements (Bookchin 1988, 2004), defining them as “emerging ‘free space’ for popular, often libertarian, civic entities, and the civic bases for a new body politic” (Bookchin 1988, 186). He also speaks about “alternative organizations, technologies, periodicals, food cooperatives, health and women’s centers, schools, even barter-markets [and] local and regional political coalitions” (Bookchin 1986a, 152) as key examples that challenge capitalism. However, in his later work, Bookchin modified his approach and criticized the effectiveness of these experiences and concentrated his efforts on developing communalism (1995b, 2007, 2015).

Bookchin explicitly disagrees with communitarian and social experiments, such as cooperatives, social clubs, and neighborhood centers, common solutions posed to the capitalist system (Bookchin 1995b). His critique rests on the limitation of their success and the deterioration of their social dimensions caused by “the pressure of competition or simply greed, [which turns these initiatives] into corporations in their own right” (Bookchin 1995b, 2). He observes that every business seems to necessitate molding itself to the imperative to “grow or die,” if it wants to survive in the current system. Bookchin believes that these experiments invariably disappear or are incorporated into the capitalist system. Another signal of his opposition to these solutions can be found in Bookchin’s discussion (1995c) of so-called “lifestyle anarchism,” which had especially spread in the United States in the 1990s, in contrast with what he called “social anarchism.” Lifestyle anarchists, he argues, are those who dress in an anarchistic style or live in certain ways, but do not align their activities with the development of a revolutionary project. Additionally, he makes a connection between lifestyle and individualism: “individualist anarchism remained largely a bohemian lifestyle, most conspicuous in its demands for sexual freedom (‘free love’) and enamored of innovations in art, behavior, and clothing” (Bookchin 1995c, 8). He also opposes primitivist and postmodern forms of anarchism, especially these notions posed by anarchist philosophers, John Zerzan and Hakim Bey. Instead, Bookchin proposes a return to an anarchism with a strong “social framework.” He furthermore, criticizes consensus decision-making processes. In the present day, however, practices of consensus are spreading (Marshall 2008; Trapese Collective 2007; Seeds for Change 2013), as demonstrated by social movements throughout the world (Sitrin and Azzellini 2014) and the Kurdish experiences (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga 2016). It does not follow that, as Bookchin feared

(1995d), they lack internal organization. Despite some well-argued points, such as his justified critique of the emphasis on “lifestyle” present in the anarchism movement, this work is the weakest part of Bookchin’s production (Price 2012).

However, in Bookchin’s earlier work, there is a valuable analysis of the role of social movements that deserves to be recovered. Many anarchist thinkers try to articulate the tension between personal autonomy and social freedom: these two aspects cannot be separated and must be interconnected. Replying directly to Bookchin, Clark (2013) states that “the bridge [between social anarchism and lifestyle anarchism] is crossed many times each day by those who practice the anarchist ideal of communal individuality in their everyday lives” (192). Under this bridge, for social ecologists as well, social movements can be a privileged actor for social change. Indeed, social movements have expressed a need to inspire social transformation throughout history (Chodorkoff 1980, 2014). Underlining the importance of social movements in supporting and grounding urban struggles, Chodorkoff (2014) outlines strategies to move from the stagnant aftermath of the 2011 square occupations to the construction of “*permanent autonomous zones*” (175), to “solidify” the Occupy movement (Imboden 2012). For social ecology, the occupation of public squares represents an important example of direct democracy; however, we should consider that while “directly democratic processes are in the movement context they do not constitute direct democracy, they constitute movement democracy” (Chodorkoff 2014, 174–175). In other words, what was reached is not a “real” direct democracy, but rather an inspiring example, which instilled understanding and practice of deeper democracy into participants and witnesses. The development of this practice and understanding within public life creates a kind of proof that direct democracy is possible, at least within movement contexts; now is the moment to expand, to put this in practice in our everyday lives, and to build dual power.

CRITICALLY ASSESSING COMMUNALISM

As shown in the previous section, one reason for the rupture between anarchism and social ecology has been the debate on electoral participation. The political project of social ecology, communalism, makes use of electoral strategies. However, communalism, as a political project, goes far beyond a simple electoral strategy and shares with social movements the need to build direct democracy practices. Moreover, as Harvey (2012) underlines, communalism can be the potential vision for organizing a future society that today’s social movements need to establish an alternative to the current capitalist system. Communalism is, for Harvey (2012), one of the

most advanced political projects of the radical Left. This project has been developed both as a vision for future social organization and as a pathway toward this vision.

The first aspect, which proposes a more ideal form of social organization to come, is strongly theorized; it has direct links to the communalist-like experiences in Turkish and Syrian Kurdistan and could be linked to the Zapatistas' communities. Despite several critiques and questions that still need to be answered (Light 1998; Harvey 2012; Clark 2013), communalism contains a sufficient level of detail as a future vision to which to aspire; it is supported by the evidence of living examples that can be studied as practical alternatives and viable forms of social organization. However, despite the fact that the Kurdish and Zapatista autonomous experiences have taken place as a result of years of consistent work, they have also been facilitated by unique events and spatial conditions: both took advantage of a vacuum in state power (especially the Kurdish movement), and both are located in remote areas with difficult access (particularly the Zapatistas).

While the KFM and Zapatistas are indisputable examples of alternative autonomous systems and offer invaluable lessons, they are not able to provide a recipe for social change exportable tout court to other countries, especially core and semi-periphery countries where the state is strong and stable. Moreover, in Syrian Kurdistan and Chiapas, there were neither previous municipal elections nor the creation of popular assemblies as suggested by communalism. Assemblies acquired a key role only after initial communalist-like projects were initiated. Moreover, in Turkish Kurdistan, political parties, which are supporting a communalist-like project, also participate in national elections, departing from traditional communalist doctrine that allows for participation only in local elections. Furthermore, Öcalan, inspired by Bookchin, did not apply communalism per se, but a version of the social ecological political project adapted to the specific circumstances of the Middle East: democratic confederalism (Heider and Kontny 2004). This highlights the need to adapt communalism, creating popular knowledge geared toward social change specifically tailored to the needs of the locality.

Harvey (2012) suggests that communalism can support social movements in building social change. The question is how to build a transition to communalism in other countries, where the starting conditions are different from the communalist-like examples we currently have. How can today's Left construct a path toward this communalist vision? It is this second aspect of communalism, as a path to be followed, where the "instruments" Bookchin offered may be insufficiently sophisticated to be put into practice today. I wish to stress the potential role of social-movement practices in the construction

of communalist-like pathways, a role that has, so far, been neglected. Social ecology needs to learn from them.

Bookchin referenced specific historical examples to ground his general and prescriptive political project: democracy in ancient Athens, medieval free cities, and the tradition of town meetings in New England. While not to diminish the importance of these examples, making them the main, or even exclusive, pillars of communalism creates difficulty for this project to be understood and adopted in different contexts. Indeed, we should recuperate the first theorization of communalism:

Communalism is not a fixed electoral dogma that depends upon the state, in whatever form, to initiate municipal institutional changes. In practice, it will obviously vary from locality to locality and country to country. (Bookchin 1995b, 12)

As Souza (2010) suggests, communalism should acquire a more flexible stand. For communalism to become an effective strategy for social change, participation in municipal elections, which is now a prescription, should instead be considered a recommendation to follow or not depending on the specific context of the struggle. Social ecology should relax the prescription that elections are the main, or only, path. It is necessary to recover the role of grassroots work (Martin 2010) in preparing the terrain for the widespread practice of direct democracy (see in this context the ideas of social ecologists Chodorkoff 2014; Roussopoulos 2015), affinity groups, and the role of direct action. This applies, as well, to communalism's prescriptive requirement to build popular assemblies.

This more flexible communalism advances the political project and responds explicitly to Souza's critique:

Bookchin's solution is both limited and risky. The Argentine and several other experiences suggest that the challenge of institutional struggle cannot be confined to the boundaries of "libertarian municipalism." The complexity of state/"civil society" relationships and the seductive power of (neo)populism, "participatory management and planning" ("participatory budgeting," for instance), and so on, seem to require both *cautiousness and creativity*, probably more than Bookchin suspected. (2012a, 26)

The relationship between social movements and the state is multifaceted and complex. The survival of the communalist project depends upon taking these phenomena into account and the importance of social movements' actions.

CONCLUSIONS: BUILDING A CULTURE OF RESISTANCE

In this chapter, I first explore the value of social ecology theory in the struggles to come for social movements. Second, informed by experiences of existing social movements, I explored the main shortcomings of communalism, offering solutions to continue to develop social ecology as an anarchist political ecology.

To conclude this piece, it is important to stress the reconstructive vision (Chodorkoff 2014) of social ecology, as a way of creating “a new society that questions all the presuppositions of the present-day society, [. . .] its inherent ability to see the future in terms of radically new forms and values” (Bookchin 1988, 280). A strategy for change should be based on a renewed culture of resistance inspired by dialectical naturalism’s ethics and developed on key principles of “self-management, mutual aid, horizontal organization, and the fight against all forms of oppression” (Kuhn 2017, 6), where educational, grassroots projects and dual power initiatives are crucial.

Building a future ecological society “must be a holistic process that integrates all facets of a community’s life. Social, political, economic, artistic, ethical, and spiritual dimensions must all be seen as part of a whole” (Chodorkoff 2014, 21). Working against all forms of domination consists not only of “mass” liberation but also of an individual search for sustainable relationships in which reconstructive ethics are adopted in daily life practices. This is a utopian approach that goes beyond social relations to the depth of individual life and vice versa; seeds of utopia emerge “not only in the factory but also in the family, not only in the economy but also in the psyche, not only in the material conditions of life but also in the spiritual ones” (Bookchin 1988, 76).

It is necessary to repair the relationship with nature and produce a new urbanism “that combines the features of urban and rural life in a harmonized future society” (Bookchin 1986b, xi), examples being the practice of permaculture (Mollison 1990; Hemenway 2105) and the Homeless Workers’ Movement (MTST) in Brazil (Souza 2012b). This approach recovers two important features: human scale and the communitarian dimension (Bookchin 1986b), toward “decentralized eco-communities, each carefully tailored to the natural ecosystem in which it is located” (Bookchin 1986b, 161).

As Catherine, a character in Chodorkoff’s novel *Loisaida* (2011), insists in this chapter’s epigraph: memory and imagination are key. Every day we face incredible challenges posed by the capitalist system, with its destruction of the environment and persistent social inequality. On the one hand,

we must remember and analyze the past, what we did, what “they” did, and whether it worked or not. On the other, we should use our imagination, or what Bookchin calls “the *creativity of life*” (1986a: 26), to explore new and alternative forms for human and ecological liberation, deploying them differently depending on the times and contexts (see, on social ecology and degrowth, Vansintjan 2019; Finley 2018, and on social ecology and the right to the city, Venturini, Degirmenci, and Morales 2019). Applying, reinventing, decolonizing, debating, and questioning social ecology as an anarchist political ecology are thus necessary practices to continuously reimagine itself in different contexts and times. Social ecology, then, is an invaluable tool for the crises of our times and the struggles to come.

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